ABSTRACT

The age of the industrial revolution gave a tremendous stimulus to global production, creating multiple boom scenarios not only in the industrializing heartlands, but also in what was to become the tropical food producing and raw materials sector for the industrialized world. Britain and the United States were the principal beneficiaries of this process, the former through its global Empire outreach, and the latter through its continental westward expansion. In both cases, immigration became the indispensable factor. The economist W. Arthur Lewis (1978) spoke of the century’s global development as being powered by two vast streams of international migration: 50 million people leaving Europe for the temperate settlements, and another estimated 50 million people leaving India and China to work in the tropics on plantations, in mines, and in construction projects.

The European migrations, whether to the industrial centers or to the non-industrial settler peripheries, have been studied in depth. Less studied have been the global pan-Asian migrations as an indispensable complement to the pan-European migrations. Asian diaspora scholars are generally more familiar with specific migration destinations, but these tend to be studied in isolation and generally without a sense of connection with the rest of the diaspora. A case can be made that there is still a need to see the migrations whole, to understand the connections between these multiple movements, and against the background of the growth of Western industry and empire, the principal motors of 19th-century economic growth. This article is a small attempt toward this goal.